Marking out the pitch: defining the soccer fiction genre

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Mr Chair at a conference in 2007 you suggested,

> The European Soccer Novel may not as yet have a strong distinctive identity…[but] European soccer can, and indeed in the future, almost certainly will provide legitimate, effective subject matter for serious literary art.
>
> (D'Arcy 2007)

The possibility that that future is upon us is the issue I'd like to address today. This paper will highlight the historical and contemporary development of the soccer fiction novel. It will establish a number of specific conventions and discuss whether the fields collected works can be regarded as a genre in their own right.

My first experience of soccer fiction was via comic book stories. As a fan (a regular attendee at Celtic Park) and an avid reader, I moved to books, novels mostly, only to be haunted by the lack of soccer. It seemed there were no soccer novels. This is a sentiment noted by John Turnbull, DJ Taylor and George Plimpton among others. While, the writing concerning the world's most popular sport (the 2006 World Cup was televised in 214 countries with an accumulated TV audience estimate at 26.29billion viewers) is abundant, works of fiction are still relatively rare, their number and history is arguably substantial enough for their examination as a collective.

Before I discuss the soccer fiction novel, I need to examine the notion of 'genre'. According to David Chandler it is most commonly used to classify common practices and features of narrative representation (2004, 1). Traditional definitions are likely, "to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as theme or setting) which are shared by the texts... [and] regarded as belonging to them" (ibid). While acknowledging the existence of a 'loose consensus' in literature, David Chandler argues "there are no undisputed maps of the system of genres in any medium" (2004, 2).

In his work *The Architext (1979, trans. 1992)*, literary theorist Gerard Genette asserts, "the subject of poetics is not the text," (1979, 1) but the *architext*, "the entire set of general or transcendent categories - types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text" (ibid). He argues that in a developed "system of genres" (1979, 8), it is not the separation of each form from others, according to characteristics specific to only that form, but the characteristics themselves. Their interplay within and between each individual work in the context or genre is equally important. "The tragic can exist apart from tragedy, just as there are doubtless tragedies that lack the tragic or that in any case are less tragic than others" (Genette 1979, 19).

John Cawelti (2006, 186) argues that a genre needs 'invention' as much as it requires shared meaning and patterns of convention. Inventions present the new and unfamiliar, elements which force a genre to continually move and change. As John Hartley (in O'Sullivan et al (1994), cited in Chandler 2004, 3) states, the addition of one new work is enough to change the genre as a whole. The notion that genres are formed by conventions that change over time is integral to the development of a definition for the collected works of soccer fiction.

I have sought to establish and identify conventions in soccer fiction through an examination of historical development. As Philip French, Umberto Eco and WH Auden have established, this is an accepted methodology in the analytical discourse of other genres. As David Chandler suggests, "how we define genre depends on our purposes; the adequacy of our definition... must surely be related to the light that the exploration sheds on the phenomenon" (2004, 4). The working definition I have therefore arrived at considers the identification of common features of narrative representation and accounts for 'invention' which reflects and perpetuates the fluid nature of a genre, or what Franco Moretti refers to as the "morphological arrangements" (2005, 14) of a genre. Moretti's theoretical work on 'distant reading,' suggests there may be added value in a historical argument for a generic consideration of soccer fiction.

First though I need to establish a definition of the field and outline the soccer novel's historical development and its contemporary status before registering or identifying its trademarks, characteristics and reliable patterns of representation.

I would like to propose a working definition of soccer fiction. . *Soccer fiction* is:

> *Any work of fiction with a significant reliance on football (or soccer as its referred to in the US and Australia) as a central or substantive element of the narrative.*

I am aware that this definition is in need of focus, particularly around what qualifies as *significant*, but it offers a centre spot, somewhere to play from until the field firms up.

Soccer fiction has seen many forms: poetry; comic books; fanzines, short stories and, of course, the novel. According to Moretti the novel, as a phenomenon is "easy to isolate" (Moretti 2003, 73) and one that "lends itself to comparative work" (ibid). I've taken this as a starting point for my own research.

The Encyclopedia of British Soccer (Cox, Vamplew and Russell 2002, 199) suggests the origins of soccer in literature began with Arnold Bennett (*The Card*, 1911). PG Wodehouse published *Mike and PSmith*, the year before, but soccer fiction may be older. While there is some anecdotal evidence of short story publications predating either of these texts, "Hastily written and formulaic" (Cox, Vamplew and Russell 2002, 200) soccer stories certainly began to appear with regularity in Victorian boys' magazines like *Adventure* in the early 1920s. Around the same time, female characters in stories such as *Ray of the Rovers* and *Meg Foster* played football and "fought for workers rights, profit-sharing and cooperatives" (Melling 1998, 98). Interest in these and other soccer fictions surged in the 1920s and 1930s along with the rising popularity of the professional game. The *Aldine Football Novel* series and the Amalgamated Press's *Football and Sports Library* were the best known soccer fictions of the era.

The 1950s saw the emergence of emotionally-charged and sophisticated, socio-political commentaries such as Robin Jenkins' *The Thistle and The Grail* (1954). For writers like Alan Silitoe (1959) and Gordon Williams (1969) the soccer pitch became a place to voice societal concern and outrage. Naughton (1961) and Glanville (1964, 1971) used the opportunity to engage with their own playing experiences. While this paper is focused on works in English, I would like to note that Turnbull, Satterlee and Raab (2008) highlight a number of international writers published around this time, such as Peter Handke (1970), Ephraim Kishon (1971) and Antonio Skármeta (1975).)

The advent of tabloid journalism in the mid 1970s thrust professional players such as Terry Venables (1979) and Jimmy Greaves (1980) into the authorial limelight, as soccer fiction sought broader markets. A notable exception to this was JL Carr's *How Steeple Sinderby Won The FA Cup* (1975) which satirised tabloid trends and recaptured the romance of earlier eras.

In the 1990s Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), "signified a widening in terms of cultural taste of soccer's audience" (Haynes 1995, 1). Importantly, *Fever Pitch* is an autobiography. More importantly, it made "soccer culture fashionable" (Redhead 1991, 1997b; King, 2002; Guilianotti, 1999, in Redhead, 2004) and with it, soccer writing. Hunter Davies, Simon Kuper, Roddy Doyle, DJ Taylor, Mick Bowers, and others wrote works where soccer "at once refuge, palliative and escape route, ceases to be soccer and takes on a wholly figurative significance" (Taylor in Kuper 1997, 97). Cox, Vamplew and Russell contend these writers and others, "spoke eloquently to suburban middle classes," (2002, 202) in a time when, "an interest in soccer became an essential part of the middle-class social agenda" (ibid). Redhead describes these works as a "burgeoning movement of soccer writing which was essentially seen, self-consciously, as a new bourgeois genre in literature," (2004, 294), and frequently refers to them as the 'soccerati', a label collectively given to the writers by cultural commentator, Tony Parsons (1994, 126). Significantly "Hoolie lit" (Brimson, 2008), the vast library of hooligan stories (Redhead, 2004c, in Redhead, 2009, 11), became a major force in soccer fiction at the same time. Redhead (2004, 394) puts forward the view that the nature of the violence and the intrinsic cultural role of the fan is explored in the works of John King. I would suggest it is also apparent in the works of Dougie Brimson, Kevin Sampson and plays at the periphery of the work of Irvine Welsh. As part of

what he ironically refers to as the *Repetitive Beat Generation* (2000, 7), Redhead sees their writing as a working-class response to 'the soccerati'.

The contemporary view of soccer fiction is an equally interesting picture. 'Hoolie lit' is still popular (Redhead 2004, 295). Works by Sampson, Brimson and King have all become film projects (Redhead, 2009 email). Reprints of both JL Carrs and Robin Jenkins' works and the commercial and critical success of *The Damned United* (2006), and Anthony Cartwright's, *Heartland* (2009) allude to a renewed interest in quality soccer fiction.

In *The Global Game*, Turnbull, Satterlee and Raab (2008), suggest a continuing, and growing, global interest in soccer fiction. The advent of the 'Soccer Mom' novel (Montoya 2008) has coincided with a rise in the game's popularity in the US. More significant though is the increased popularity of the young adult soccer fiction market. Combined with the game's growing participation levels, particularly in the US and Australia, there has been a remarkable change in the soccer fiction available to young adults. There is a growing market for more thematically sophisticated and challenging young adult and children's texts. These include works of soccer fiction such as the *Gracie Faltrain* series (Crowley 2004, 2006, 2008), *Kick Off* (King 2007) and *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (Deep-Jones 2008) aimed specifically at young female readers. The broader range of readership and the proliferation of the contemporary soccer novel, particularly in the young adult fiction market, suggests for the first time since the 1920s and 1930s, soccer fiction has firm place on bookshop shelves.

Amy Devitt posits the view that genres become or are a predisposed response to the recurrence of the roles or conventions built in to their make-up (2008, 576), that they suggest a narrative grammar of convention and representation used to reinforce and soothe reader expectations. With this in mind, I will now assess

patterns of representation and conventions in soccer fiction. They include setting and narrative structure, the role of soccer and its impact on the protagonist, the role of the protagonist, the development of the soccer voice and other aspects particular to soccer fiction such as language use and player stereotypes.

The pitch, the game surface and arena for the action, is a vital element of the setting in soccer fiction in literal and figurative terms. Whether the events of the text take place in or outside a stadium, in a local park, school or pub, there is a pitch, even if it is not explicitly marked out with goalposts at either end.

Novels which use 'on the pitch action' (McGowan 2008, 212) as part of their narrative, display the grassy surface as a field of conflict or, in more sentimental terms, as a theatre of 'dreams'. The pitch is also used as a means to allow a character to express them selves through soccer eg. *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (Deep-Jones 2008), *Kick-Off* (D. King 2005), *The Diary of Darren Tackle* (White 1998) and *Granville Tingate* (Lawson and Larkin 2001) which has a ball as one of its main characters.

Many soccer novels step away from the grass to view the pitch and the 'played soccer' (McGowan 2008, 214), from the observer's or spectator's point of view. They include texts about a club such as *English Settlement* (Taylor 1996), texts about individual players, such as *The Keeper* (Peet 2003) and texts about managers or fans such as *The Season Ticket* (Tulloch 2000).
There are a number of works which operate even further away from the pitch. These include works of soccer-related violence like *Awaydays* (Sampson, 1996) and *The Crew* (Brimson, 1998) and soccer mom texts such as *Soccer Mom Secrets* (Gunther & Holstein, 2007) and *Carpool Diem* (Star, 2008). The works

of Irvine Welsh and John King on fan culture very rarely glimpse the playing surface and Mel Stein's soccer crime fiction happens in and around soccer clubs, but rarely takes notice of the players' on field efforts. Importantly, due to their setting, use of language and character development these works have '*a significant reliance on soccer as a central or substantive element of the narrative.'*

In very rare instances the lead character of the novel is not even interested in soccer, but soccer still has a crucial role in character development, such as *Kestrel for a Knave* (1969) and possibly *The Plague (1947).*

Time spent on the pitch seems to be determined by the intended audience. Young adult soccer fiction spends a great deal of time in, on or looking at matches. The protagonist is invariably a combatant or player. Multiple part series such as *Megs* (Montagnana-Wallace, 2007-2010), Bali Rai's *Stars* series (2008 - 2010) and *The David Beckham Academy* (2009, 2010) are all good examples of this. Adult soccer fiction is a little more distant. With few exceptions, the protagonist is more likely to be an observer of the game, such as a manager, former player or spectator or fan. Examples include *Pitch Black* (Brentnall, 2004) and *The Football Factory* (J. King 1996). *Heartland* (Cartwright 2009) is a rare exception in that one of its main characters still plays.

The 'distance' the novel sits from soccer impacts and is impacted on by the narrative structure. In texts such as Dominic Holland's *The Ripple Effect* (1989), Des Dillon's *Return of the Busby Babes* (1993) and the aforementioned JL Carr and Robin Jenkins' titles, the plot follows a tournament with a highly prized trophy to be won. This commonplace

convention lends soccer fiction a natural tension used effectively to thread other narrative elements together.

Generally soccer fiction is written from the first or third person male perspective. A majority of adult soccer fiction narratives are in the male third person perspective (McGowan 2008, 219). There were a small number of female protagonists in the texts of the 1920s. With the exception of Soccer Mom novels, there are very few contemporary examples. This is not reflected in young adult soccer fiction where protagonists of both genders appear to be equally represented.

The voice of soccer novel, its characters and or narrators are generally inflected with vernacular of soccer. Whether the protagonist is a young female player who such as Charlie Brown, in *Pretty Tough* (2007) or an older male soccer hooligan such as Billy Evans from *The Crew* (Brimson, 1999) and *Top Dog* (Brimson, 2001) the voice will invariably make frequent use of the vernacular. Even where the use of voice and techniques of narration across the texts are starkly different, and these titles are disparate examples, the books will rely on and use copious references to soccer or soccer culture.

Following from this, the language then almost becomes a characteristic in itself. Here are two examples the first is from *The Football Factory* (King 1996), the second is from *The Season Ticket* (Tulloch 2000).

> Norwich hit a beautiful long pass that cuts the Chelsea defence and the farmers [*Norwich*] bury the ball in the back of the net…
>
> (King 1996, 108)

> The ball swung in from the corner; a straining group of heads rose to meet it.
>
> (Tulloch 2000, 145)

"The long pass" is a standard strategic kick from deep in one team's half to an attacking player in the opposition half. To "bury the ball in the back of the net," is the act of scoring a goal, and, "the ball swung in from the corner," sees the attacking team win a corner kick, which is played into the defending team's goalmouth, where the attackers try to score. These uses of soccer vernacular inform the novels and reader expectations and place the text within the field of soccer fiction. It is also worth noting that use of soccer language can present issues. Potentially prohibitive jargon and 'insider' jokes while pleasing to fans will not engage non-soccer readers.

Like other genres such as the western or the spy novel, the soccer fiction novel arguably has its own 'regular' cast. Taylor describes, 'the rock-like defender [being] humbled by the jinking imp'(in Kuper 1997, 79) and in doing so he highlights two such characterisations. The sizable, strong and stoic defender is almost magically, physically and emotionally reduced by the spritely skills of his often far shorter attacking opponent. This deliberate choice of scenario and its explicit contrast highlights a very common subplot in soccer fiction.

Other player stereotypes include 'the bruiser'; exemplified by the brutish Turk McCabe (*The Thistle and The Grail* (1954)), a foul-mouthed defender who weathers every attack, plays through injury and by sheer force of aggressive will, drags his teammates from the brink of disaster; 'the cool-headed captain',

embodied in Alex Slingsby *(How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won the FA Cup,* (1975)), who leads through strength of character, makes the hard decisions and inspires his team mates with his own dedication and fortitude on and off the pitch; and 'the cheeky, gifted rogue' captured in Joe Swift, the mercurial, exuberant and often comedic protagonist of Hunter Davies' *Striker* (1992). The role and personality of a teams' last line of defence is explored in texts such as Glanville's *Goalkeepers are Crazy* (1974). I believe there are a number of other identifiable player stereotypes.

Mimesis

These characters, settings and narrative structures are used to capture the action and atmosphere of the real-life event. For soccer fans to engage with the text there is an expectation that it will represent a mimetic or realistic point of view. As realist fiction writer Raymond Carver suggests, it amounts to one layer of reality unfolding and giving way to another, perhaps richer layer, (McSweeney 2007, 15). The soccer match being acted out on grass provides context to greater emotional and/or psychological issues unfolding under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) playing surface (ibid). This speaks to the literal and figurative distance of a text to 'played soccer'.

The soccer fan's level of inherent knowledge reinforces and underpins their understanding of the action and forces precision on the writer. The story must seem as real as possible. Soccer fiction novels can and often do take advantage of the game's natural propensity for drama to explore and develop deeper, more emotionally complex issues, but they will always be an imitation or representation of aspects of the sensible world, a textual production of an impression of the truth, a realistic fake.

So do the collective works of soccer fiction qualify as a genre?

This marking out of the genre's pitch has demonstrated the existence of and reliance on repeated conventions, devices and techniques in soccer fiction. It has done so with an understanding that genres are malleable, that their growth is fluid and change is dependent on how each new contribution affects the corpus. In Cawelti's terms 'invention' is required to stimulate a given genre's perpetuity. I would therefore like to note some recent examples which have been instrumental in changing the nature of soccer fiction.

Heartland (Cartwright 2009) and *The Damned United* (Peace 2006) are immersed in the vernacular of soccer and tap into a number of conventions, yet they have pushed soccer fiction into new territory and forced the reader to readdress their expectations. Cartwright's novel is divided into equal halves like a soccer match. It offers structural parallels and comparisons between an international game and a local game. Peace's novel fictionalises the forty-four day tenure of one of British soccer's most notorious managers. These works experiment with voice in literary terms, they use intertextuality and challenge preconceived notions of structure. Neither text offers an expected climax. Their closes are appropriate to their context, but there is no real sense of the win in traditional terms, no trophy to hold aloft.

Terry Pratchet's *Unseen Academicals* (2010) is not the first, but it is a rare example of fantasy soccer. Through the popularity of his previous works (he has sold in excess of 60 million books worldwide) it could potentially bring the game to an audience which may never have considered reading a soccer novel. The crossover into a new area or literary genre, in this case fantasy, will potentially add a new aspect to the collective works of soccer fiction. It is also, obviously, an exception to the notion of mimetical soccer fiction.

There are a number of others which pull and push at more traditional boundaries. Gordon Williams' *Scenes Like These,* a careful study of a man who plays soccer in a poverty stricken coal town in Scotland, was short listed for the 1969 Booker Prize. An achievement which underlines its literary qualities. Hanna Bell's novel *The Hollow Ball* (1961) is as much about socialism in Northern Ireland as it is about soccer.

This short, but, I think, significant demonstration of the depth and strength of soccer fiction as a collective body has at its traditional and contemporary heart a number of characteristics and commonalities which feature across the breadth of its narrative representation. There are recognisable similarities in the midst of its variety, but as it has moved and adjusted, the core has changed too. It seems to have moved fluidly since Jenkins in 1954, if not earlier. This growth in diversity has continued through important works. I would suggest that the existence of the aforementioned examples and their allusion to the process of continuing invention, hold true to soccer fiction conventions and stretch and challenge the ever changing boundaries of the genre.

Conclusion

The term Genre constitutes a tacit contract between an author and a reader, a short hand serving to increase efficiency in communication. For a text to be placed within a literary genre, it requires a level of conformity, an adherence to expectation. This examination demonstrates conformity to generic convention, repetition in modes of representation, interplay and invention. In doing so, it demonstrates significant internal textual evidence within soccer fiction (in novel length works) which, if it does not qualify or quantify definition as a genre,

offers a very solid foundation to consider the collected works as ‘effective subject matter for serious literary art’.

I’d like to add that this is not the final whistle. This exploration of soccer fiction, is a prelude to kick-off. A warm up before the game begins in earnest, before the shins and the egos are bruised, before the goals are scored. It merely seeks to the mark out the pitch.